Lynch / Rivette. Only by Sight, or Lost Allusions: “Eraserhead” and “Paris Belongs to Us”

Comparing a film by David Lynch with one by Jacques Rivette, paired by a new retrospective series in New York.

Christopher Small 16 Dec 2015

This article accompanies the Film Society of Lincoln Center’s dual retrospective of the films of Jacques Rivette and David Lynch and is part of an ongoing review of Rivette’s films for the Notebook*, in light of several major re-releases of his work.*

Two uneasy debuts whose directors evince a canny feeling for the way the world, photographed with simultaneous emphasis and naturalism, might be turned inside-out by the camera. Working with a minimum of resources in their first features, these directors' ability to take their characters’ familiarity with their own living spaces (cramped hotel rooms, dingy apartments) and constituent clutter (lamps, drawings, notepads) and turn it against them, cast every anonymous object as part of a larger conspiracy, gives their movies their peculiar, anxious zest.[1] It means that, in a similarly wigged-out way in *Eraserhead* and *Paris Belongs to Us*, both long gestating projects by nervous filmmakers in their late twenties, the very thing that might seem to conspire against these stories’ women and men is less the lurking violence of hidden forces, the conspiracy proper, and more a suffocating world of their own design—their own partners, colleagues, workspaces, handwriting, wallpaper, banal choices of décor.









Eraserhead's shots of bare walls, window-frames, the corners of rooms—an unusual

subjective/objective point-of-view device that would be developed further in *Blue Velvet* and realised more powerfully still in *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* and *Mulholland Drive*—are about as mendacious and sinister as any of the movie's overblown, one-of-a-kind shock-effects. Lynch strikes such a balance between the two types of anxious feeling—between the brash and the banal—that one might be revulsed with equal force by a bedpost as by a syruping, wailing fetus. It's a technique, that uncanny way the drab objects of quotidian life might suddenly play as fantastical on screen, that Rivette pulls off with much greater effect in *Paris Belongs to Us*, an anxiously beautiful, classical caricature of the homespun, daydream assemblages of his all-handheld masterpieces *L'amour fou*, *Out 1*, *Celine and Julie Go Boating*, *Paris s'en va*, and *Le Pont du Nord*. It's as much Hitchcock as Lang—that is, the Hitchcock of the uber-Rivettean *Rope* and *Under Capricorn*, where objects and décor alike trade with the pacing characters, oscillating between foreground and background, as part of the ever-shifting, plastic, three-dimensional dramaturgy—and something few others have explored as thoroughly, or exploited as miraculously, since. One senses the young Rivette, in *Paris Belongs to Us*, butting up against the boundaries, the limitations of his own calculations: there's a demonstrable desire to keep expanding the borders of the project, to do away with the film's rounded edges and send it spinning out, centreless, carried by its own warring energy forever. For all their similarities, the opposite desire seems to be at play in *Eraserhead*, where even the ineffable quirks of Lynch's surrealism seem to reroute the movie's energies back into itself, sealing the entrances and exits, so to speak, so that it remains a hermetic found-object; a whole universe contained as a kind of bioindustrial snowglobe the viewer might study from outside.

[1] As distinct from their use of never-seen characters alluded to but never seen; their off-screen netherworlds of hidden machinations that seems to control the plot without ever intruding into it; or their open-ended dream sequences that mesh with the regular flow of the movie.